

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 QUITO 000534

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (PARAS RENUMBERED)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/07/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: A DEFENSIVE GUTIERREZ BLASTS CRITICS

REF: A. QUITO 467

[B](#). QUITO 418

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: President Lucio Gutierrez feels justified in criticizing Ecuador's political opposition, calling his public rebuttals valid tit-for-tat. "If I don't respond to their allegations," he told the Ambassador March 7, "the people will believe them." Gutierrez attributed opposition elites' virulence to policies he had implemented to reduce their allegedly corrupt influence. He deplored the wave of low-level political violence and harassment currently enveloping the capital, however. On the current Supreme Court impasse, the president acknowledged his proposed referendum was overly complex and needed rework; optimistically, he claimed political ally (but referendum opponent) Alvaro Noboa was warming to the idea of a Court swap. Gutierrez hinted at additional Cabinet changes, lamenting his newly-named government minister's poor health and questioning whether the Embassy "had anything" on Administration Secretary Oscar Ayerve.

[1](#)2. (C) In strongest terms, the Ambassador urged the president to desist from further confrontation and engage the opposition in real dialogue. "Ecuador elected you because you were different from old-style politicians," she emphasized; waging wars with the media and opposition would only shrink his stature. Embassy support for Ecuadorian democracy and its institutions was firm -- we would continue to encourage dialogue on all sides. She warned the president not to confuse U.S. neutrality with passivity, however. Should GoE elements continue their clumsy attempts to muzzle the opposition, with or without Gutierrez approval, the Embassy was prepared to air its concerns publicly. END SUMMARY.

Referendum To Go Forward?

[1](#)3. (SBU) Travel delays due to inclement weather and a case of food poisoning (the president's) had turned the Ambassador's March 7 breakfast with Gutierrez into a late working lunch. The GoE leader opened with his pet project: a referendum designed to resolve the current Supreme Court controversy. The president realized the current proposal, as-is, had little chance of clearing Congress. "Too many questions," he acknowledged, and "too much opposition" from the legislature's numerous voting blocs. Staff were working to reduced the dozen-item consultation to a single question for the electorate. Gutierrez was confident the revised referendum would enjoy broader support. Specifically, he claimed PRIAN leader and former presidential candidate Alvaro Noboa no longer opposed a second Court change. "He finally realizes this Court is no better than the last," Gutierrez offered.

Fighting: No End In Sight

[1](#)4. (SBU) Turning to Quito's superheated political environment, an exasperated Gutierrez claimed he had never seen such verbal aggression against a sitting president. The corrupt elites despised him for his military background and leadership style. Once they became aware of his determination to wrest back control over state and parastatal institutions, they counter-attacked, exploiting their control over Ecuadorian media. Even the Church was against him; on Sunday, Gutierrez revealed, a prominent priest had called presidential abode Carondelet Palace a "stable, inhabited by animals." Were he not to respond in kind to these ad hominem attacks, he argued, Ecuador's masses would accept the opposition diatribe as true.

[1](#)5. (C) The Ambassador disagreed. Answering accusations with insults was petty and non-presidential, she admonished. Where was the dialogue he and his followers had promised? Where was the legislative agenda? Key bills, including energy sector reform, the civil aviation law, and anti-TIP legislation, languished in Congress, victims of the nonsensical posturing between government loyalists and

opposition. Things had to change.

16. (C) Ecuador's rank-and-file had chosen the president based on his outsider status and determination to tackle corruption, the Ambassador reminded. Yet Gutierrez's behavior was no different than that of career politicians he earlier lambasted. Others shared the view; she recounted her recent trip to Esmeraldas, where marginalized Afro-Ecuadorians, once among Gutierrez's strongest supporters, had derided the president's focus on politics over governance.

17. (C) Worse, political violence appeared on the upswing. The Ambassador recounted the hours-earlier confrontation between members of Zero Corruption (ZC), a pro-GoE organization that supported the current Court, and Citizen Participation (PC), a USAID-financed electoral NGO. ZC members had attempted to infiltrate PC's offices early March 7, spray-painting ugly graffiti and threatening staff (Septel) before police arrived 30 minutes later. In addition, she understood that unidentified thugs two days earlier had fired on the vehicle of Congressional Deputy Enrique Ayala. The Ambassador laid no blame on the GoE for the incidents. Yet the GoE tolerated two similarly clumsy attempts to muzzle prominent critics the Jesuit Order and retired General Jorge Gallardo (Reftels). Taken together, the actions fueled perceptions of a GoE campaign to intimidate its critics.

USG Support Tied To Good Governance

18. (C) The Embassy message would remain constant, the Ambassador asserted, focusing on support for Ecuador's constitution, separation of powers, and government-opposition dialogue. Yet there were lines in the sand. She was prepared to go public with criticism of any Ecuadorian institution, the presidency included, should circumstances merit. Defending democracy was the USG's overriding priority in Ecuador.

19. (SBU) Gutierrez swore his forces were not behind the Ayala attack. In fact, earlier he had expressed condolences in a telephone call to the Socialist deputy, promising him personal protection. "No one has more to lose than me" from the wave of harassment and violence in Quito, the president asserted. He would ensure the police investigated all leads.

Another Cabinet "Re-oxygenation" Soon?

110. (C) Changing gears, the president hinted at additional Cabinet turnover. Minister of Government Xavier Ledesma, who recently traveled to the United States for emergency glaucoma surgery, was in bad shape; Gutierrez hoped he would return soon. Recent appointee Oscar Ayerve also was on the president's mind. Gutierrez attributed much of the controversy surrounding his new administration secretary general to bad blood between Ayerve and former Cabinet official Patricio Acosta. Nonetheless, he asked whether the Embassy had incriminating information on the embattled official.

COMMENT

11. (C) Taking a page from modern child rearing, both the GoE and opposition could use a "time out" from their constant bickering. Regrettably, no such parental authority exists here, and the silliness will likely continue. Yet the violent turn worries us. Should convincing proof of administration involvement surface, it would mandate a strong USG protest. The aforementioned incidents don't yet constitute evidence of GoE complicity, however. The attack on Ayala might prove opposition-spawned, since his Socialist Party's opportunistic flip-flopping has annoyed both sides to the Court debate. And while the assault on PC headquarters was not the opposition's work, it seems too clumsy to have earned the president's chop. Regardless, the government must do a better job investigating these attacks and preventing others.

112. (C) Administration insiders reveal Gutierrez continues to heed Embassy recommendations and counsel. We have reason to hope he heard loud and clear our private admonitions to turn down the vitriol and swear off political violence. If not, we're prepared to make our views public. END COMMENT.
KENNEY